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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hankiss, E. (2002). Brilliant ideas or brilliant errors? Twelve years of social science research in Eastern Europe. In M. Kaase, V. Sparschuh, & A. Wenninger (Eds.), *Three social science disciplines in Central and Eastern Europe: handbook on economics, political science and sociology (1989-2001)* (pp. 17-24). Berlin: Informationszentrum Sozialwissenschaften. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-285485>

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Elemér Hankiss

Brilliant Ideas or Brilliant Errors? ¹ Twelve Years of Social Science Research in Eastern Europe

*To replace political philosophy by the history
of political philosophy means to replace a
doctrine which claims to be true by a survey
of more or less brilliant errors.*

Leo Strauss: *City and the Man*.

The high quality, sound empirical foundations, and serious argumentation found in the papers in this volume allow me to be – in these introductory words – slightly less serious and a bit more personal than my colleagues.

When drawing up the balance sheet of social science research in Eastern Europe in the last twelve to twenty years, do we survey “more or less brilliant errors”, as Leo Strauss suggested in another context? Or do we discover brilliant ideas? I think that we have both of these experiences. But my intention here is neither to speak about the mistakes we may have made, nor to deliver the *laudatio* of our achievements. I am going to tell my personal version of what has happened in the last twenty years. I shall trace the trajectory between 1980 and 2002, i.e., from what I propose to call “The Age of Expectations” to our present “Age of Perplexity”, from an age of plans and proposals to an age of questions and questions.

My division into periods is rather arbitrary. And a bit provocative. Namely, I divide these twenty years into no less than seven periods. This must sound absurd and unacceptable in the first instant. But do not take the word “period” too seriously. These seven items might also be called trends, or schools of thought, or various kinds and styles of “scholarly approach”. I also have to admit that these periods greatly overlap in time. But in spite of these *caveats*, I think it might be interesting to try to distinguish them.

Due to time constraints, my overview will be schematic and rudimentary. I could even say that, to a slight extent, it will have the character of a caricature, since I shall describe these periods by accentuating only their most salient features. In each case I shall try to find, first, a MOTTO for the period in question. Then I shall mention the MAIN GENRES of research in the period, followed by the MAIN QUESTION scholars tried to answer in the period. Next, I shall try to list the MAIN ISSUES that were dealt with. I shall also try to outline the FRAMEWORK within which scholars interpreted their findings. I shall describe the style of APPROACH that characterized their work and, finally, I shall describe the scholarly MOOD of the period.

The Age of Expectations (1980-1989)

The first period precedes the time span under scrutiny in this conference. It is the 1980s, and I propose to call it “The Age of Expectations”. Its MOTTO might be “the squaring of the circle”. Why “squaring of the circle”? Because we social scientists who lived and worked in those years tried to solve something that could not be solved. We tried to transform state socialism into democracy and market economy without letting the Soviet Union or our own apparatchiks notice our doing so. This was, of course, impossible, but we tried hard to square the circle. That’s why I think this motto fits the period.

¹ This was an oral contribution at the conference on Political Science Research in Eastern Europe, 1990-2000, organized by Jean Blondel and Jan Zielonka in collaboration with the European Consortium for Political Research. Florence, November 9-10, 2001.

The main GENRES were daydreams, utopias, and scenarios. Here is a sample of some of the major and/or notorious scenarios:

- Geopolitical scenarios (center/periphery, imperialism, the decline of empires, convergence);
- Historical scenarios (backwardness, “three Europes”, modernization, proletarianization, embourgeoisement, democratization, oligarchization);
- “Doomsday” scenarios (nuclear catastrophe, the third world war, the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, fundamentalist revolution);
- Deadlock scenarios: (neo-Stalinist restoration, “muddling through”, “Ottomanization”, “new Yalta”, “Finlandization”, normalization, national communism);
- Populist scenarios (Central European populism, slavophilism, the good czar scenario);
- Reforms without freedom (reform dictatorship, the technocratic scenario);
- Market plus centralized politics (feasible socialism, manager socialism, the South Korean road to capitalism);
- Economic democracy (“Galbraithian socialism”, self-managing socialism, shareholder socialism, entrepreneurial socialism);
- Transition scenarios (constitutional socialism, dual political system, intra-institutional pluralism, corporatist state, self-limiting democracy);
- The moral revolution (new evolutionism, silent revolution, anti-politics, existential revolution).

Every week or every month, a new hypothesis, a new theory, a new program, or a brand new scenario was proposed for the transformation of the world or at least of state socialism. And they were discussed passionately in the countries of Central Europe. I also call them “immodest proposals”. Why were they “immodest”? You certainly remember Jonathan Swift’s famous pamphlet from 1729, titled “A Modest Proposal”, in which he proposed to solve the problem of the devastating poverty in Ireland by prompting poor people to fatten their children and sell them for food.¹ Following his example, we tried to convince the apparatchiks that it was in their own best interest to go to hell.

The main QUESTION to be answered was, invariably, how to square the circle. How to pull off the trick? As we shall see in a moment, we answered this question in a number of ways. I do not remember whether we believed or did not really believe in our own answers.

The main ISSUE of the age was to reform or not to reform the system. Or: whether it is possible or impossible to reform it.

The FRAMEWORK was “The West” as myth, as the Holy Grail. The West was our benchmark, and the myth of the Western world the framework within which our thoughts moved. The West was the ideal of perfection, the Holy Grail, which we had only to touch and then we would be saved, then all our problems would be solved overnight. Let me tell an anecdote that may illustrate our frame of mind in those years. On a gloomy November morning, I met one of my friends in the street. He had a bad cold. I, as a civilized person, gave him all the usual silly advice. Go to bed; drink a lot of hot tea, etc. But to anything I said he kept repeating: No, it wouldn’t help. No, it wouldn’t help. Finally, losing my temper, I asked him why he did not want to help himself. “Well, I cannot help myself”, he answered. “Nothing can help us as long as the Russians are here”.

Our APPROACH was moral, normative, *aufklärerisch*. We lived, as a matter of fact, in the illusion that once we entered the Paradise of the West, we would not even catch a cold. Our approach was, as you see, foolishly naive. It was strongly moral in its character. It envisioned the world as the struggle between Good and Evil. It was normative, since we proposed programs that should have been accepted and implemented by those in power. And it was “*aufklärerisch*”.² We thought that, with the help of rational thinking, everything could be solved.

Our MOOD was a kind of pessimistic optimism. We were hoping against hope, we were stubbornly optimistic, though we knew that the chances of success were minimal. James Bond’s motto could have been ours in those days: “Never say never.”

As I have mentioned, a great variety of scenarios were drawn up in those years. What happened to these enormous intellectual (and moral) efforts? Did they evaporate without leaving a trace? Have they become anachronistic after 1989, in the new world of democracy and the market economy?³ Surveying this selection, one can hardly avoid the question of what has remained of all these brilliant or foolish ideas?

Well, they did not overturn the Soviet Union or the communist systems in their own countries. But they played an important role in keeping people intellectually and morally alive in the long decades of oppression; in shaping social consciousness; in generating a more and more critical spirit even in the ranks of the Communist Party; in keeping the spirit of opposition and human dignity alive; in preparing a new political and economic elite for the duties they would have to perform after 1989; and in preparing a peaceful transition from state socialism to democracy in 1989-1990.

If we compare the 1980s with our present situation, the change is, of course, extremely positive. Instead of dictatorship, oppression, poverty, and economic decline, we now have democracy, freedom, a modest affluence, and dynamically growing economies. But perhaps we have also lost something important. We may have lost the effervescence of ideas so characteristic of the 1980s, we may have lost the critical spirit, the courage to ask important questions, and the determination not to accept the world as it is.

We have certainly become better social scientists, we have learned the latest methods, but have we not lost some of the former openness and creativity of our minds? Have we not lost at least part of our ability to ask the really important question? Maybe we have. Maybe we have not. Instead of jumping to conclusions even before we have started our survey of political science research in the 1990s, let's check what happened to us and to our discipline in those years. Let's see the remaining six "periods".

The Age of Transitology (1990-1994)

The MOTTO of "The Age of Transitology" was "From Trabant to Mercedes". This refers to a joke well known in the early 1990s. The question: What is the transition from state socialism to democracy and to market economy like? The answer – it is like transforming a Trabant into a Mercedes while driving – was meant to characterize the difficulties of East European transition.

The characteristic GENRE of this period was transitology itself. As far as the main QUESTIONS and ISSUES of the period are concerned, we were eager to understand what was happening to us and to the world. Where did we come from and where were we going? How to make the transition? How to transform our world quickly enough to avoid missing this unique historical opportunity? Is this a revolution? And if it is, what kind of revolution is it: a revolution from below, or from above? Is it a "negotiated" revolution (if such a thing exists at all)? Is it a social or a bourgeois revolution? Or – heaven forbid – a counter-revolution? Or is it a historical compromise? Is it only a regime change? Or also a systemic change? Or should we, too, "*penser la révolution*", à la Furet, and accept the fact that continuity has been more important than change? After an interruption of forty years, Western-type modernization and embourgeoisement have been simply resumed, and that's it.

Our benchmark, the FRAMEWORK of our analysis in this period was Max Weber and Co. Our APPROACH was eclectic and, at the same time, deeply imbued with political philosophy. Our MOOD was a kind of catching-up neurosis. When we realized soon after 1989 that we were not the pets and darlings of the European Union, we understandably felt the urgency of catching up with the West. Let me illustrate this urgency, this haste, with an anecdote. Michael Burawoy, who is now professor of sociology at Berkeley, was a PhD student in Hungary in the 1970s. He spent more than a year in various factories as a simple factory hand. When he finally left the country, we accompanied him to the airport. At the gate, taking his leave, he said to us, "You Hungarians are nice guys, you work hard, you do everything in your power to make life better in your country. But

something is wrong with this whole business. You are like people who are running up an escalator, at breakneck speed, but the escalator is running downward.”

After 1989, the escalator first stopped and then started to run upward. But we still felt that our speed might not be enough to catch up with the West.

The Age of Apprenticeship (1992-1994)

Even before recovering from the fever of transitology, we settled down and started to do our apprenticeship in Western- or American-type political science research.

“The squaring of the square” might be a fitting MOTTO for this period in our scholarly lives. We were stunned by the sheer amount and high quality of Western social science research. We were overwhelmed by myriad tables, figures, and statistics. We had the impression and were also told that our Western colleagues had solved practically everything. And consequently all we had to do was to learn from them, to apply their methods to our societies, to become modest pieces in the puzzle of international, comparative research. In other words, all we could and should do was solve once more what had already been solved. In other words: to square the square.

Number crunching, journal articles and Excel tables were the main GENRES of this period. There was no central QUESTION of the period. There was instead a warning: “No questions, please!” – because questions had already been answered and to raise new questions would have been politically incorrect (though in those years we did not use this expression yet).

Western political science served as a FRAMEWORK in our analyses. Political parties, parliaments, elite groups, democratic institutions, and the like were the basic ISSUES discussed and researched by most of our colleagues. They did a good job; they had learned their *métier*. The atmosphere was a bit colonial, but the quality of research kept improving. By this time, our papers and books had become strictly empirical, descriptive, and comparative in their APPROACH. A quantifying rage swept over the field. The MOOD was a mixture of zeal and civilized boredom.

The Age of Professionalism (1995-)

This has been a more advanced stage in our research activities. Facts, facts, facts: this was our motto and credo. We were writing heavily footnoted papers, monographs, and policy papers; we fell in love with classifications and typologies (GENRE), we kept looking up our names in citation indexes. Our QUESTIONS were: How do institutions function? How to compare political developments in various countries? How are decisions made? Our approach had become institutionalist and functionalist, we were keen on working with precise definitions, and we studied the way institutions functioned and decisions were made. In addition to the traditional ISSUES (governments, parliaments, constitutions, elites, parties, etc.), new issues emerged as well, first of all the problems of the process of EU integration and of globalization. Our MOOD became cool and professional. Or did it not?

The Age of New Fears (1994-1999)

There has been a disturbing note in the scholarly life of this region throughout this last decade, an undercurrent of passions, animosities, and fears. The political and ideological cleavage of our societies appeared also, though to a lesser extent, in our discipline. That’s why I think “*We and They*” might be an appropriate MOTTO of this period. The main GENRE of this undercurrent was polemics. Nation, ethnicity, identities, and ideologies were the main ISSUES. The opposition of a kind of Herderian versus a Popperian philosophy may have been the metaphorical FRAMEWORK of our thinking. The general APPROACH was emotional. The MOOD was distrust, fear, and intolerance.

I do not know the degree to which this was a general problem in the region. It has certainly been a problem in Hungary. It infected our way of thinking and, as a consequence, compromised our professionalism in many ways. It did a lot of harm to our country and damaged our discipline as well. I could even speak in this respect of a new “*trahison des clercs*”, a new treason of the intellectuals, because too many of us got involved too early, too easily, too much, and too

subserviently in politics. If some of our colleagues entered the new political class, it was okay. They quickly forgot their scholarly selves, and we quickly forgot them. But a considerable number of political scientists in academia made the mistake of mixing the two fields: scholarship and politics. They got emotionally involved in politics, they could not keep their distance, and they lost their objectivity. Instead of being their subject of research, politics has become a kind of opium for them, a new sort of the “*opium des intellectuels*” of Raymond Aron.

Fortunately this straying of some of us has not destroyed decent and authentic scholarship in this part of the world. It has been only an undercurrent, a side effect, while the main body of political science research remained healthy, sane, and reliable.

The Age of Perplexity (1998-)

We have been perplexed since our former vision of a clear and simple trajectory leading us from state socialism to Europe and democracy grew more and more blurred by a number of new problems, questions, and uncertainties. The MOTTO of the period might be: My God! Its characteristic QUESTIONS were: Where have we arrived? What is going on with us and in the world?

Even our basic concepts have become vague and fuzzy. Let me give an example. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of democracy was clear and unambiguous. Democracy meant democracy. Full stop. In recent years, however, it has disintegrated into a welter of different meanings. Let me list some of these nowadays widely discussed meanings: democratura, formal democracy, heterogeneous, electoral, patrician, incomplete, consolidated, majoritarian, pluralistic, consensual, consociational, contractual, neo-corporatist, “agonistic”, liberal, non-liberal, radical, grassroots, interactive, deliberative, discursive, post-modern, post-national, supra-national, multi-layered, polycentric, democracy by numbers, democracy by intensity, democracy without democrats. This rich variety of meanings reminds me of the words of the king-actor in *Hamlet*, in the scene in which he explains that they can play any genres, “tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral”.

Let me add that it was not a postmodern fervor, but life itself, that deconstructed the concept of democracy in this radical way. The same thing has happened to some of our other basic ISSUES and concepts, like sovereignty, governance, social contract, progress, justice, and others.

Our previously stable benchmarks have disappeared; our FRAMEWORK of interpretation has crumbled. In addition to reports on empirical research projects, thought papers have become the characteristic GENRE of the period. Hermeneutics has reemerged from oblivion. Perplexity characterizes our MOOD. Which in itself is not bad. This perplexity, this teeming of questions, this deconstruction of our traditional concepts may challenge us, may prompt us to revisit our traditional ideas, to re-examine our basic principles, to reinterpret the world around us.

The Age of Uncertainty? (2001-)

We are entering a new age. We do not know yet what the major issues, what the new problems, opportunities, new anxieties, and new challenges will be. We do not even know what the FRAMEWORK of our thinking will be. Will it be a new world order? Or a new world disorder? We do not know yet what kind of new approaches and methodologies we will have to develop.

A MOTTO? Not yet, but a QUESTION: How to cope with uncertainty?

Uncertainty has always been a major element of future developments. But the events of September 11 have warned us that in the coming years and decades we will probably have to cope with an unusually high level of uncertainty. There are already people who have proposed to call it “The Age of Uncertainty”.

With a bit of exaggeration, I could say that in the last decade or two we, as citizens and as social scientists, slept the sleep of the just. We have lived in a fool’s paradise. We indulged in the illusion that after so many centuries of turmoil and tragedy, the world is now, at long last, progressing towards a Kantian universal peace. Democracy, legality, and human rights are winning

ground all over the world, the conditions of economic growth and affluence are given, and we will have time to solve, step by step, the problems of poverty and global injustice. September 11 woke us up with a horrendous bang. Its impact may prove to be like that of the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, which – according to the testimony of Voltaire – shook the Enlightenment's faith in a harmonious and rational universe and the glorious future of humankind.

Hopefully we shall be able to recover from this shock and reassert our faith in a relatively peaceful progress. Which is not to say that we need not prepare ourselves for the challenges of an age of uncertainties.

We, as social scientists, have to help our fellow citizens prepare themselves for various possible futures, various possible worlds. We have to carefully analyze the major economic, social, political, cultural, and spiritual trends in the world, the motive forces underlying our present world, the forces that will, or may, shape our future. “*Scenarios*” may become once more, as they were in the 1980s, the characteristic GENRE of this new period in the history of our discipline.

Post-September 11 scenarios may give an idea of how uncertain our future is. There are open questions in all fields. Throughout the 1990s, we were told that the *age of ideologies* had come to an end and that a new age of sober *pragmatism* was emerging. September 11 has shown that powerful new ideologies with dangerous emotional loading may overwhelm even the most developed and enlightened nations. We were also told that we arrived at the *end of history* and all we would have to do in the future was to spread an already good model all over the world. And again, in the wake of September 11, history is coming back to us with a vengeance. We do not know yet either whether in the coming years the FRAMEWORK of our lives and thinking will be that of a “*new world order*” or that of a “*new world disorder*”. Will we have a Pax Americana or a Bellum Americanum? A Pax Americana, or a War between the North and the South, or a global war on terrorism? Will we live in a free world or in a world whose developed part will withdraw within the walls of a Fortress Europe, Fortress USA, or Fortress West, surrounded by a sea of poverty, despair, and lethal conflicts? Will societies and people’s minds remain open, or will they close down? Will we be able to preserve a multi-cultural world, or will we become entangled in a destructive clash of civilizations? Will democracy or the temptation of law and order prevail, or will the temptations of authoritarianism prove too strong to resist? What will happen to the process of globalization? Will it slow down or accelerate? Will the present process of globalization, driven by business interests, go on, or will it be transformed by social and local interests? Will September 11 and its aftermath transform our lifestyle and our present civilization of consumerism and radical individualism? And if they do, what may come afterwards? A new Puritanism? A new communitarianism? Or something else? Are we entering the “E”-age, the Electronic Age, or the “F”-age, i.e., the Age of Fear? Shall I continue?

Prospects

The conditions and the objectives of our research work may change in this coming age. We may need new tools, new approaches, and a new way of thinking to be able to study and construe this new world. Let me call attention to a few fields in which I think we should strengthen our positions.

Theoretical Deficit

In recent years, being involved in empirical and analytical studies, we have had less time and energy to discuss the basic issues of our discipline and those of our world. This theoretical deficit may become a serious handicap if we need new tools, new ideas, and new hypotheses to understand a new world.⁴ The almost total absence of critical theory in Eastern Europe is a serious deficiency in an age in which a new world order or disorder is emerging and should be analyzed with special intensity.

Data Deficit

Strangely enough, we also struggle with a data deficit, in spite of one or two decades of intense empirical and quantitative research work. We have plenty of survey data and data coming from

institutional analysis. But September 11 has shown us that we need much more non-survey type data. Let us call such data grassroots data or anthropological data on the everyday lives, behavior, reactions, “habitus”, beliefs, and networks of people in our countries.

Monitoring

September 11 has also called our attention to the fact that monitoring social development around the world should be taken much more seriously. It should be better coordinated. The existing “social surveys”, “barometers”, and “monitors” should work with more articulate instruments; their outcomes should be analyzed more thoroughly than they currently are.

The State of the Nation

State-of-the-nation reports should be drawn up and published in as many countries as possible, including variables and chapters on the economy, politics, society, culture, international position, etc. The present reports, prepared by various international agencies, focus on specific fields and issues. Comprehensive and comparable pictures and assessments of individual countries, which are still missing, could improve global cooperation.

Trend Analysis

In a world changing at such a speed and running toward so many possible (and impossible) futures, the analysis of latent economic, political, social, and cultural trends is of special importance. Relatively little has been done in this field in recent years.

Causal Analysis

In the same way, more efforts should be devoted to the study of motive forces, interests, belief systems, aspirations, and strategies underlying these trends.

Conflict Analysis

In the 1960s and 1970s, conflict analysis was extremely popular in Western social sciences, but it went into eclipse in the 1980s and has played a relatively small role in East European social sciences. This is a serious deficiency in a region and period of transition in which the potential for conflict is dangerously high.

Systems Analysis

There are relatively few projects that study societies, regions, and the globe with the instruments of systems analysis.

Unintended Consequences

In a world that may become more and more unpredictable, the analysis of unintended consequences and contingencies (Festenstein), of irrational factors (Elster), and of complexity and inherent uncertainty (Kitschelt) may become of primary importance.

Cross-Cultural Analysis

In a globalizing world, cross-cultural studies obviously become indispensable. There is already a huge and excellent body of comparative studies of parliaments, political parties, constitutions, the rule of the law, etc. But this type of studies should be extended to a great number of other political, economic, social, and cultural factors. How do Western and other institutions and political cultures mesh? How relevant and adaptable are Western concepts and institutions in other civilizations (including parts of Eastern Europe). What have been and what may be the local responses to Western concepts and institutions? These and similar questions should be carefully studied.

Social Movements

September 11 has called our attention to the importance of social movements. How do they start, how do they gather force, what are their goals and aspirations, what are their basic principles and norms of conduct, what is their potential for conflict, and what are their underlying motive forces? Answering these questions may become more important in the coming years and decades than replicating some of our institutional analyses.

The Human Factor

The founding fathers of political philosophy – Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill – all started by studying “human nature”, proceeding from there to the analysis of political institutions. Later this tradition fell into oblivion. It is time to resuscitate it. Recent events have

shown all over the world – in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Middle East, as well as New York – that the human factor plays a decisive role in shaping our history. The so-called “soft variables” have become harder and harder, and to ignore them could jeopardize our survival chances. And would certainly compromise the quality of our research work.

I may be mistaken, but I think that we in Eastern Europe and our colleagues anywhere in the world badly need comprehensive research projects to study the human personality, people’s needs and motivations, their basic values, visions of the world, belief systems, behavioral patterns, life goals and life strategies, their ideas about the meaning or meaninglessness of their lives, their expectations, fears and anxieties, their frustrations and deprivations, their models of happiness, their ideas about a “just world”, their identities and roles, their sources of self-respect, and so on and so forth. Knowing more about the human factor, we would know much more about our world as well, and about our tasks, prospects, and chances in a new world.

In the title of this paper, I asked whether the survey of the last ten to twenty years of political science research in Eastern Europe would be a survey of brilliant ideas or of brilliant errors. I think that we may safely conclude that it is a survey of both.

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- 1 “I have been assured by a knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.”
 - 2 “*Aufklärer*” in German refers to someone who, in the spirit of Enlightenment, believes in the almost absolute power of human reason to solve everything and to transform the world into a place of peace, harmony, and morality.
 - 3 I have tried to answer this question in a paper titled “Ou sont nos idées d’antan. Les sciences sociales en Europe Centrale avant et après 1989”, Prague, le 3 Mars 2002 (to be published later this year).
 - 4 In the conference at the European University Institute in Florence, several participants mentioned and deplored this theoretical deficit. Jan Zielonka, for instance, and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, Ian Kubik and Rudolf Rizman. They also quoted similar opinions by Staniszkis, Bauman, Wnuk-Lipinski, and others. (Political Science Research in Eastern Europe, 1990-2000. Conference organized by Jean Blondel and Jan Zielonka in collaboration with the European Consortium for Political Research. Florence, November 9-10, 2001.)